

"They Told Me The Streets Were Paved With Gold":

Italian immigration to America

LLI course taught by Douglas Kenning

The Story of Vincenzo (Vincent) Scilipoti from

The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem, 1880-1950

by Robert A. Orsi (2002)

Many of the inner complexities and trials of immigration are illustrated in the work-biography of **Vincent Scilipoti**. His story was written down in 1934 by Marie Lipari, a resident of Italian **Harlem** who was doing research on the community.⁵⁷ **Scilipoti** came to **Harlem** from Nicosia in the province of Catania in 1888. He was thirty years old. He left behind him in Nicosia a wife and two small children.

Scilipoti was working as a small merchant—he owned his own grocery store—and was making “just enough to live” (all quotations are Scilipoti’s own words, translated from Sicilian by Lipari), when two paesani who had immigrated to **Harlem** returned to Nicosia looking “prosperous and well-dressed.” They told him “tales of prosperity in America” and he decided to emigrate. When he left, “I thought that work was plentiful and I could get a job easily.” The reality proved to be quite different. He was met at Castle Garden by a paesano who took him to his own apartment on 110th Street and First Avenue. Three days later, **Scilipoti** found a room in the same neighborhood for two dollars a month. He then began a long and difficult odyssey in search of work through the terrible labyrinth of late-nineteenth-century American capitalism.

His first job, which lasted two weeks and which he got by simply joining the men already at work, was on a building under construction in West **Harlem**. His second job, laying pipes on Morningside Heights, also lasted two weeks, but this one had some expensive strings attached to it. The boss of the job demanded and received a three-dollar commission and an additional fifty cents for medical insurance. None of this was refunded, of course, when **Scilipoti** lost the job. As he observed: “This boss never kept men longer than 2 weeks; after he had collected his \$3.50 he discharged the workers and hired others, who were again asked to pay \$3.00 in order to get the job.”

His next job came courtesy of a padrone named Emilio, who had emigrated a few years before from Basilicata. Emilio, who worked for the Banca Garofalo, was gathering a thousand men to work on a dam in Cincinnati. This is how **Scilipoti** describes his trek westward:

I joined the group, which started out in the night. Emilio had told us we would reach our destination before morning, so none of us

took any food. Instead we were kept one night and one day on a boat with nothing to eat. We were taken to Norfolk, Va., where a special train was ready for the 1,000 workmen. We were promised that we would get to our destination in an hour so we were not given time to eat. But the train took all night. When we arrived the construction company had trucks ready at the station, which was four miles from the place of work.

The workers had been told that the company was paying for their transportation; instead, ten dollars was deducted from their pay for the journey.

Scilipoti settled in to what he expected would be regular labor. But he was in for yet another surprise. The workers were given \$1.25 for a ten-hour day, but they worked only irregularly. The rest of the time they sat around in the shacks the company had provided for them—one hundred to a shack. The only place to buy food was from Emilio, and “Emilio overcharged.” Living conditions in the shacks were terrible. As Scilipoti described them: “We slept on the second and third floors. The floor space was divided into spaces about 4 or 5 feet wide with boards. Two or three men slept in each of these spaces. . . . There were no beds even for the sick, and the only bedding we had was a little straw.” Emilio was armed to ensure that none of the men he had brought from New York would try to escape; when a group of workers did flee one night, Emilio went after them with a company crew, caught them, and “beat them unmercifully.”

Scilipoti eventually made his way back to Harlem, which he used as a point of reorientation, where he found work digging cellars in West Harlem. After two days on this job, he hurt his leg and was unable to continue working. His boss refused to pay him for his two days’ labor, and when Scilipoti insisted the boss called the police. Scilipoti, terrified of arrest and possible deportation, fled without his pay. A number of other jobs followed, including one in Louisiana planting beets, and Scilipoti had several more experiences with Italian padroni in Harlem. Finally, in about 1891, Scilipoti, who was “disgusted with bosses” by this time, began to sell lemons on the streets of Italian Harlem. In 1893, five years after his arrival, he was at last able to go back to Italy for his family. They returned together in 1894.